

CAN THE NAVY AFFORD A THIRD POSTURE DRAWDOWN?

Kevin N. Lewis

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Military triumphs are well and good, but it is widely agreed that the finest display of command is found in an orderly fighting withdrawal. Noteworthy rearguard actions like Corunna, Dunkirk, and Hungnam are interesting not just to balladeers, but to professional instructors who know that maintaining force integrity in the face of severe pressure ranks among the most difficult tests a commander might face.

Though a far less dramatic matter—if hardly much of an inspiration for, say, a monument—overseeing a successful force structure drawdown likewise can be thought of as the acid test for posture planners.[1] Maintaining a coherent force able to fulfill its missions in a turbulent political and strategic environment, all the while grappling with the myriad details that occupy force managers especially during a force retrenchment—this is a tall order.

We recently completed such a drawdown, occasioned mainly by the end of the Cold War. Many questions about the Navy's future course remain, but for now and for some time to come, our operational options will be shaped by our recent divestiture. That said, certain questions emerge.

First, how did we do? The overall answer: fine. Specific decisions of what to cut or keep doubtless reflected detailed analysis, but it is possible to sketch out the general drift of the drawdown "on the back of an envelope," as it were. Viewed this way, the reduction makes good sense.

Second, what can be said about force structure planning in general based on our experience with this drawdown? The answer: quite a bit. Compared with routine existence, drawdowns stand out. But underneath the drama and turbulence we find a surprisingly consistent display of long-term force planning desiderata. This is the case in both of our modern big rollbacks: one initiated at the height of the Vietnam War and one launched around 1991.

In this paper, I first discuss both drawdowns, and then tease out from their salient features some conclusions about force management. My ultimate contention will be that force structuring cannot and

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should not be done on a "spot market" basis. Barring some crisis or large-scale happening, the posture in general should not be tinkered with without good reason. Fiddling with force design may—even if it seems justified in the short run—commit us to long-term consequences that are better unfronted. One does not and should not just add and subtract bits of posture like fashion accessories—this wreaks havoc all around.

The fallacious nature of much popular thinking about force planning is suggested by the case studies of the two drawdowns addressed in this paper. In brief, drawdowns can be thought of as unscheduled intervals that lead in short order to results that would have occurred more gradually absent a pivotal instigating event. In this regard, they are of interest not just *suus ipse*: they tell us interesting things about where the Navy is heading in the long run, and raise ominous warning flags about the future posture.

## **II. A SHORT REVIEW OF THE POST-VIETNAM DRAWDOWN**

After the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States rebuilt its armed forces to confront the requirements of its recognized Cold War roles. Since large numbers of "low mileage" World War II ships were available, the USN could be expanded in short order. In combination with extensive modernization and rehabilitation schemes to bring its "Greatest Generation" cadre into fighting trim, the Navy also undertook a vigorous program to design and build new types of ships better suited to modern needs.

Despite a building program that dwarfs anything that we have seen in recent years, however, the fleet was bound to remain substantially a legacy of World War II for some time. Between Korea and Vietnam, USN end-strength generally resided in the area of 950 to 1,050 ships, the exact numbers depending on the counting rules applied.[2]

Initially, of course, the entire force was of WWII-vintage. This "legacy" force was complemented steadily by new builds. For instance, between FY47 and FY64, about 400 new ships were authorized. By any measure, the figure is dramatic: it is twice the number of ships procured during the same 18-year interval between FY83 and FY00. Yet despite this effort, even as late as 1968, two-thirds of the posture dated back to World War II.

The astute reader will immediately note in these few facts a fundamental and inescapable reality. Allowing for matters of force balance, life extension, etc., even such a prodigious SCN program as the one supported during the 1950s and early 1960s (of 20+ new ships per year) would be sufficient only to sustain a long-term fleet of about 650 ships.

Thus, the longevity of the World War II legacy becomes a crucial planning determinant, since a big part of the posture would arrive at the end of its service life simultaneously. The arithmetic is straightforward: 1945 plus 25 years--the reasonable life expectancy for, say, a FRAMed *Gearing* or a GUPPYed *Tench*--equals 1970 A.D. True, some vessels might soldier on, but such grey mares would pose a raft of ever-worsening support problems.

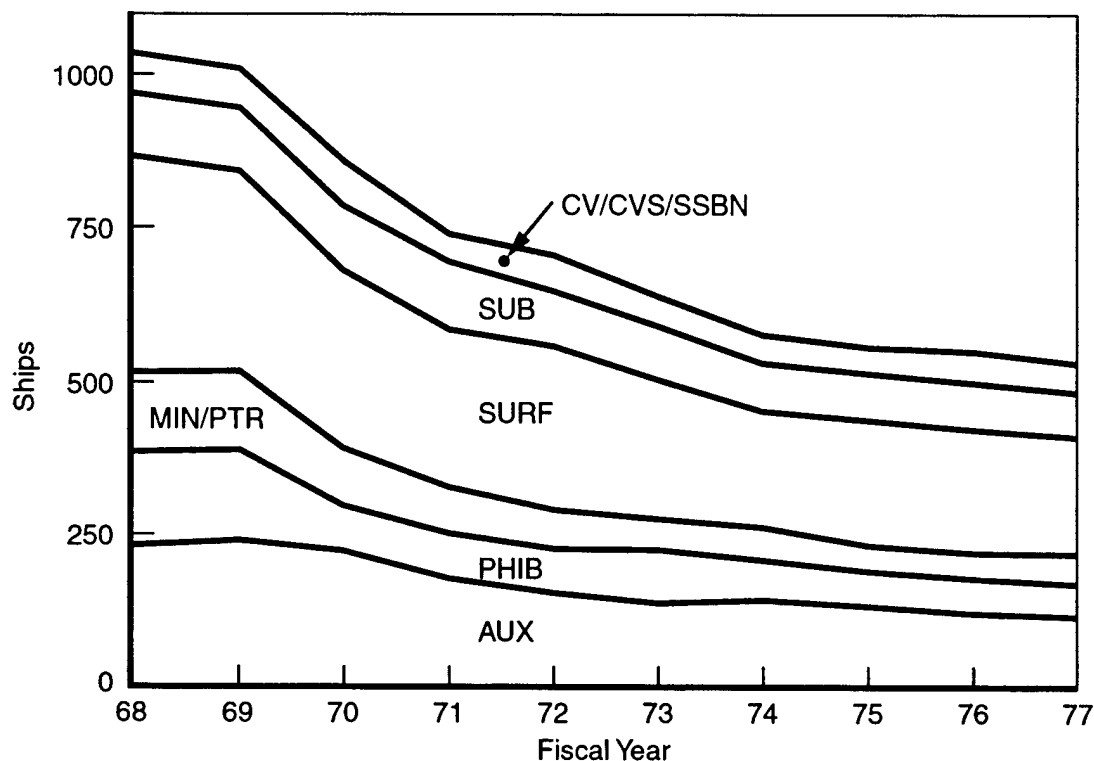
The inevitability of this 1970-ish force structure "bathtub" did not go unnoticed by Navy force planners at the beginning of the 1960s. According to one source, a candidate SCN program proposed during the early McNamara years envisioned new builds at the staggering rate of 65 to 75 ships per year. This 1961 plan anticipated one CVA and one CVS per year in the mid/late 1960s; about 5 CGNs per year; and a steady buy of 8 SSNs/year.[3] The goal here, of course, was to have one's cake and eat it too—to have a thousand-ship fleet and have it reflect the latest in technology and capability. But even under the most optimistic circumstances, presuming budgets for a one-for-one replacement of the thousand-ship fleet of the 1950s was, to put it kindly, patently unrealistic.

As it turned out, conditions in the mid- and late-1960s were anything but favorable even for the sustenance and modernization of a much diminished stable fleet. Defense budgets may have soared during Vietnam, but operational demands not only ate up this bulge, they imposed heavily on standing obligations, notably force recapitalization. Only 33 ships were procured, for instance, during FY68-71, as opposed to the 250+ called for in the 1961 plan cited above, or the 80 to 90 that would have been bought had typical pre-Vietnam build rates been sustained. Indeed, to meet war costs, forces were scavenged: in August 1968, for instance, 50 ships were abruptly tagged for early retirement to pay for combat operations, and after that, the posture was raided regularly to raise operating funds.

On top of basic dollars-and-cents considerations, additional aspects of the Vietnam interlude had effects on both short- and long- term force plans. Among these:

- High war-related OPTEMPOs led to deferral of maintenance, driving some units to earlier graves.
- Various realities contributed to the adoption after 1972 of the All-Volunteer Force. The AVF (though it has proven an excellent idea) did however mean that it would no longer be possible to operate a vast fleet predicated on a large pool of low-cost, high-turnover personnel.
- As the war subsided, the prevailing public mood was not positive from a defense budget point-of-view: in particular, Congress is said to have imposed a general condition of austerity since nicknamed "the decade of neglect."

The combined effects of such factors would be potent. To see how much so, consider Fig. 1, which shows the drawdown of the Navy's fleet over the period FY68-FY77. The reduction in force runs to almost half of FY68 levels.



NOTE: Includes NRF ships as appropriate, but omits research and related types and certain MSC logistics types.

Figure 1—Post-Vietnam Fleet Reduction By Ship Type

For a different take on the data in Fig. 1, consider some other information. One interesting way of redrawing Fig. 1 appears in Fig. 2, which shows the decline in the force by "generation" that is, by lots of FYs in which batches of ships were commissioned. It is clear from this portrayal that the decline in ships of WWII vintage (that is, commissioned during, or shortly after, the war) pretty much explains the post-Vietnam drawdown: from about 700 ships in 1968, the WWII cohort falls to a bit more than 100 by 1977.[4]

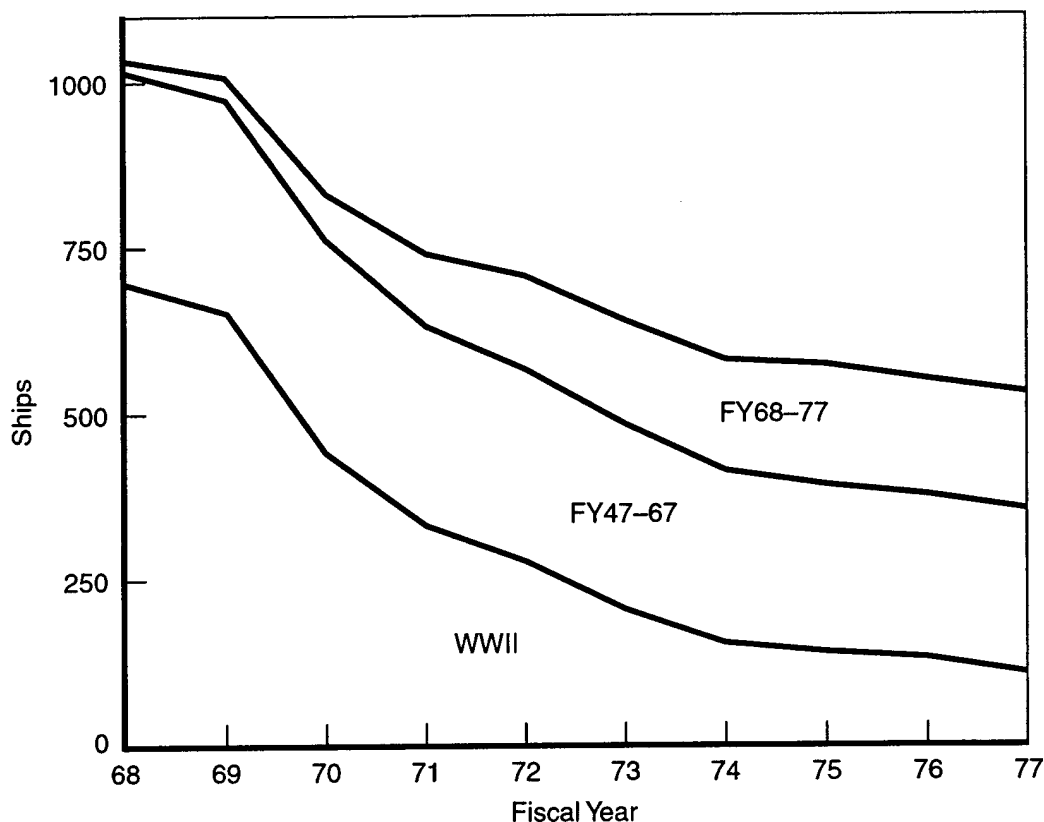


Figure 2—Post-Vietnam Reduction by “Generation” of Ship  
(FY Commissioned)

But the reductions did not reflect simply calendar age and force numbers. In particular, the numbers mask the Navy's willingness to trade numbers for capability. Lost in the aggregated Figures 1 and 2, for just one case in point, is the USN's shift to a basically all nuclear sub force, and the move toward steadily more capable attack boat classes.

Likewise, the data conceal operational and strategic shifts of other sorts. For example, older *Hancock* and *Essex* class carriers were retired *en masse*. The abolition of the CVS type was not just an odometer matter, but reflected other issues, like the fielding of improved ASW combatants, the upgrading of land-based aviation and barrier defense capabilities antisubmarine defenses, and the consolidation of fighter-attack and ASW wings into new multi-purpose carrier wings (in which S-3 squadrons would deploy as part of a new, blended CVW).

To continue, amphibious forces shifted in emphasis away from an across-the-beach assault mode toward a vertical envelopment concept (or even an administrative deployment option). For example, WWII era

LSTs (with their bow door/ramp layout) were too slow to keep up with modern formations, scored poorly in habitability terms, and relied on power plants and other systems that were balky, depended on out-of-production parts, or required special materiel and personnel pipelines. Similarly, other older types made redundant by new modes of operations included large coastal and other mine warfare forces (to be replaced partly by sled-towing helicopters).

There was also a major change in auxiliary forces. For one thing, given an overall force reduction, corresponding support types could be retired in tandem. For another, some older, general support types (e.g., netlayers and harbor tugs) were dispensed with entirely, in favor of "non-posture" alternatives. And a shift began away from old-style fleet support types toward fast multi-purpose UNREP ships. Generally, the farming out of certain logistical duties to the NRF, MSC, Coast Guard, and charters ensued, and some ship types simply were overtaken by technology (as with CCs, AGRs, and AGMRs).

Note that there is a modest (about one-fourth) reduction in certain post-war ship types (those commissioned during the interval 1947-67) over the period 1968-77; but most of this decline can be attributable to declines in three types of ship bought in the wake of Korea but not appropriate for long-term retention, even in a reserve capacity.[5] Finally, the last slice of the picture in Fig. 2 depicts the delivery of almost 180 new ships between FY68 and FY77. In terms of ship types, this is a very balanced cadre. As the alert reader will anticipate, this would be the generation of ships that would be "on the reductions cusp" when it comes time to figure the details of the post-Cold War drawdown.

To summarize the initiatives cited above, the combination of approaches chosen sets up a pattern that would be repeated in more or less exactly the same form a generation later. Options for posture reductions would include:

- "Necking down" of ship types, where appropriate, combining the capabilities of different (and separate) platforms in larger, multi-purpose platforms.
- Retirement of forces that were operationally or strategically obsolescent, or that were "inefficient users" of operating funds, or that otherwise could be replaced by less expensive non-force structure resources: in other words, putting individual ship capabilities ahead of total force numbers.
- Movement of as much of the support base as possible out of the fleet force structure (e.g., to land- or space-based alternatives to ships).



- Putting out to pasture ships that might have considerable use, but that pose some special logistical, reconditioning, or other burdens that simply cannot be accommodated under anticipated budget ceilings.[6]

### III. THE POST-COLD WAR DRAWDOWN

Turn now to the post-Cold War drawdown. Like its post-FY68 cousin, these cuts were the result both of well-known and predictable factors and relatively unexpected developments.

In the wake of the post-Vietnam drawdown, successive administrations had not only to shore up force numbers but meet new maritime challenges posed (among other things) by the growth of the Soviet submarine threat and the emergence of the modern anti-ship missile. Under difficult circumstances, a "high-low" approach to force modernization was pursued. On the one hand, for instance, a state-of-the-art *Los Angeles*-class SSN was bought, but so also were large numbers of DD/FFG types viewed by some at the time as posture "fillers".[7]

Decisionmakers prudently stuck with basics. As always during times of transition, proposals for novel and even "far out" force options were floated (among them, plans for squadrons of *Pegasus* Harpoon-equipped hydrofoils, hybrid Sea Control Ships, and the like). But, as almost always happens, quickie techno-fixes were rejected, and fleet rebuilding got underway in earnest.

During this time, U.S. planning shifted substantially toward "the main event," i.e., Central Europe. For the Navy, this meant, among other things, containing the expanding Soviet sub threat to NATO SLOCs. Other emphases continued as before (though some USMC units were provisionally tasked for conventional operations on NATO's flanks in a prepo-type mode). In all, the basic planning context held steady.

But then, late in the decade arrived the Rapid Deployment Force contingency. This scenario would involve a large sea-based force in an untraditional theater (notably Southwest Asia), and the possible projection of ground forces in a semi-administrative mode with the focus on maritime prepositioning. If anything, the Navy's list of responsibilities in 1980 was longer than it had been in 1972, but in terms of overall force characteristics, few formal adjustments in requirements had been made.

This changed after 1981 with the Reagan administration's determination to upsize the posture toward a so-called 600 Ship Navy. As originally articulated, the plan was not entirely realistic since, even with much increased procurement budgets, the Navy (like the rest of DoD) opted to buy materiel of much higher

quality. Hence, bigger budgets underwrote the purchase of roughly equal numbers of ships as before -- albeit much more capable ones. Given enough time, force expansion *and* high quality might have been possible, but as it happened the Reagan budget topped out in FY85 and began a steady process of decline.

By the late 1980s (even before the full consequences of *perestroika* and *glasnost* had been recognized), planners realized that a continuing defense budget downturn should be expected. By about 1988, there was even talk of an across-the-boards "procurement holiday." What saved things, of course, was the fact that the baseline budget had gone so high in the early 1980s that there was a long way to go before the effects of binding austerity were felt.

Developments of the late 1980s led the Navy and its sister services to reconsider their ultimate force goals. Changing USN fleet options took the form of three alternative futures charted in successive DoD Annual Reports (see Fig. 3). The first, specified in the FY90 *Posture Statement* reflected no real change in strategy or force targets, and while this plan was concocted before the fall of the Berlin Wall, any near-term uptick in budgets seemed improbable. This option laid out an FY97 objective force of about 580 ships.

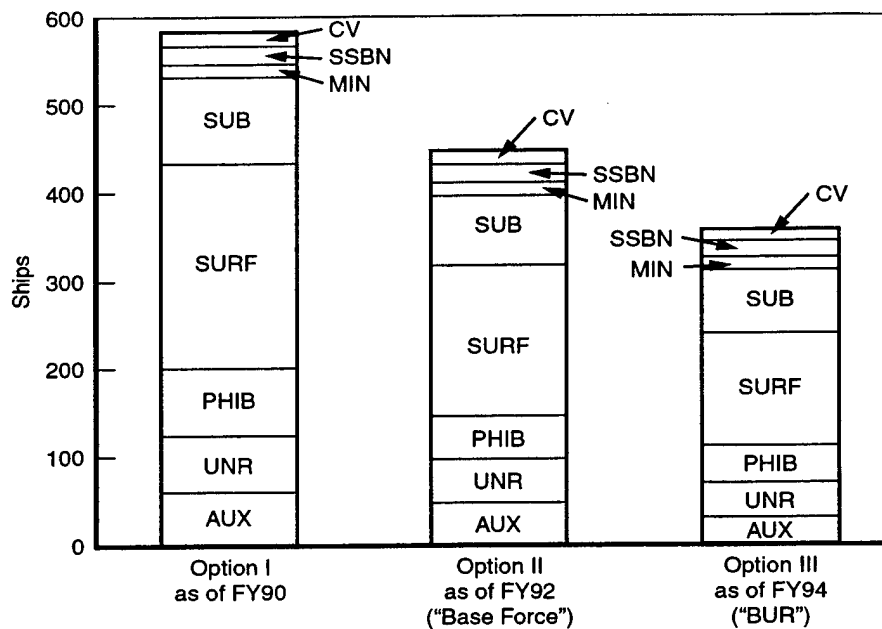


Figure 3—Various Plans for the Fleet Looking Ahead to FY97, as Seen at Different Points in the Early 1990s

But soon the picture changed dramatically, as Fig. 3 shows. First came the FY92 plan for FY97 (option II), the product of the so-called Base Force Review. The expected FY97 force was about 140 ships less than that of the baseline FY90 case. Then for FY94 and with a new Administration in Washington, a "Bottom-Up Review" (option III) force laid out an even deeper and faster reduction schedule with a FY97 fleet of only about 350 ships envisioned.

How, beyond their raw numbers, do these three plans vary, and what can be said about changing thinking in OSD and USN about long-range force goals? For starters, note that all three of the forces projected for FY97 are more or less unrelated to contemporary SCN prospects. For one thing, even very ambitious (and unlikely) build programs in the early 1990s would not have had much of an effect on FY97 force levels. Consequently, the difference between the three projections in Fig. 3 revolves around what is being retired and when, and has next to nothing to do with what is going on in the yards.

Viewed this way, the logic behind each of the three FY97 objectives can be deduced. Though each hull no doubt had its day in court, for our purposes here, any armchair student of force planning with a few recent

editions of Norman Polmar's *Ships and Aircraft of the U.S. Fleet* at hand can come up quite readily with a very satisfactory explanation for the three force options shown in Fig. 3.[8]

It turns out, for instance, that the only real way to come up with a 583-ship force by FY97 is to assume that almost nothing in the FY90 force is retired. In short, Option I seems to be based on the contradictory notions of austerity in SCN, but unreduced resources for the continued operation of just about all of the FY90 force—at least over the period shown. But nothing can turn back the clock. Option I basically postpones an ultimate block obsolescence problem. One supposes that shortly after FY97, the fleet as a whole basically goes over Niagara Falls in a barrel with mass retirements, more or less as it did after FY68.

Events of 1989 to 1991 dramatized the changing strategic planning context, as well as the need to bring likely resources into line with capabilities. The well-known "Base Force" (BF) plan called for across-the-board reductions in the all DoD forces: the end-state FY97 BF Navy (given in the FY92 *Posture Statement*) amounted to some 444 ships (see Option II in Fig. 3). Apart from the loss of two carriers, the biggest reductions were in the surface combatant force, older (*Sturgeon*) submarines, a brigade-plus of MEF lift, and all kinds of auxiliaries.

But the Base Force, in this author's view a reasonable and not hopelessly unaffordable scheme, did not long survive. Though the global basis for planning changed only modestly, budget top-lines went South more briskly: the reader may recall the wildly enthusiastic talk during the early Clinton years about a supposed massive "peace dividend" to be reaped that could be spent on every imaginable domestic National priority—health care, schools, homelessness, you name it. (A dividend was reaped, but very little of it seems to have underwritten the various schemes floating around in the early 1990s, the costs of which were in any event spectacularly underestimated.) On account of budget projections under the new concept—known as the "Bottom Up Review" (or BUR) Force—it became necessary for the Navy to dispose of more ships—even those with significant remaining shelf-life. In addition, a few specialized strategic considerations figure in the shift from the Option II to Option III forces, these apparently having mainly to do with diminished ASW requirements and changing logistical concepts.

To summarize, the reductions between the Options in Fig. 3 are fairly easy to divine. (1): Retire by age—if we start with commissioning dates, we find that the simple no-questions-asked retirement of ships 20 years old or older as of FY90 explains most of the reduction from Option II. (2): Retire those ships whose contribution is limited, or whose cost of continued operation is hard to justify in a tightening budget world (e.g., CGNs requiring nuclear refuelings). And then, (3): Retire those ships that are not considered "first line" and whose relative utility has declined on account of strategic shifts, or by changes in the way the

Navy might go about its business.[9] This step was necessitated by further budget cuts, and resource diversions on account of frequent low-intensity operations. Consequently, the BUR Force continues to "thin out the herd," albeit by quite stringent rules. Whereas deriving the Base Force was largely straightforward, the BUR reductions involved some extremely painful choices (such as the paying off of newer submarine and destroyer tenders).

Space does not permit the consideration of each and every tradeoff made, but we can illustrate the sorts of "triage" processes that seem to have underlain the rigorous cuts in these Options. As an example, consider several "tiers" of cuts that might be made to the surface combatant force, beginning with the core FY90 force, assuming no change in SCN plans, and applying ever more severe rules for cuts at each point. The entire progression amounts, basically, to a "three yards and a cloud of dust" drill, as Table 1 indicates.

**Table 1. Illustrating Successive "Tiers" of Force Cuts:  
Explaining the Surface Combatant Force in FY2000**

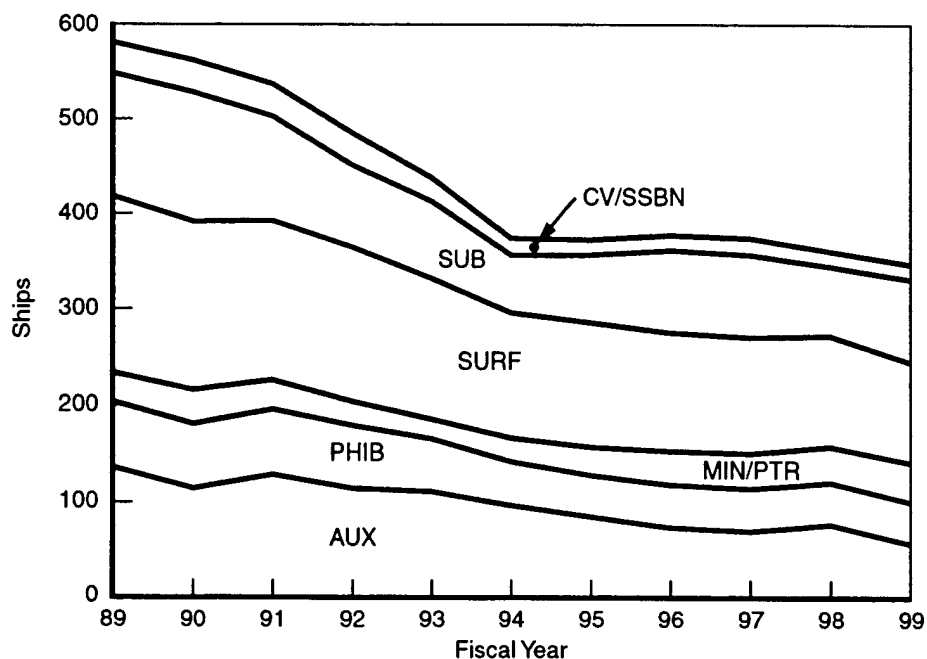
	Assume No Retirements	Retire Oldest Types Only	Retire Marginal Types	Severest Cuts
CG/DDG (AEGIS)	56	56	56	56
DD-963/DDG-993	35	35	35	24d
FFG-7	51	51	51	35e
CGN-36/38	6	6	0b	0
FF-1052	46	46	0c	0
BB-61	4	0a	0	0
CG-16/26	18	0a	0	0
CGN-9/25/35	3	0a	0	0
DDG-2/37	22	0a	0	0
FF-1037	2	0a	0	0
Total	243	194	142	115

Note: Figures include both active and NRF ships.

- a. Retire ships by age 30. Battleships are retired, on account of their appetites for operational and personnel resources.
- b. Forgo refuelings and overhauls of these nuclear ships.
- c. Not deemed worthwhile in light of capability or demand for low-threat anti-sub escort (even in Cadre "FFT" capacity).
- d. Discard *Spruance/Kidd* types lacking VLS battery installations.

Let us combine this material, and examine now Figures 4 and 5, which show the USN's force decline from a nominal end-of-Cold War (given as FY89) posture to one for the effective end of the decline a decade

later.[10] (Figs 4 and 5 parallel the illustrations given above for the post-Vietnam drawdown.) We start with Fig. 4, which shows the posture contraction by force element.



NOTE: Includes NRF ships as appropriate and also "local defense" types, but omits research and related types.

Figure 4—Post-Cold War Fleet Reduction By Ship Type

Modest or easily explainable reductions are found in some cases. SSBN modernization is accomplished; the widely-discussed carrier force reduction is there; the patrol/mine force actually grows a bit on account of the addition of Category B and Coastal Defense types (that do not appear in some DoD force tables).

But other parts of the posture take notable hits. The surface force we have already discussed. The submarine force necks down to one revolving around the Improved *Los Angeles* and the most up-to-date 688s. Certain older elements of the amphibious lift force are retired early (we will return to this in a moment). And, as with the years after 1970, there is a major divestiture (call it a "consolidation") of auxiliary assets.

Now, and as with Fig. 2 above, we show the decline of the fleet complement by relative age, showing each by its nominal generation of commissioning.

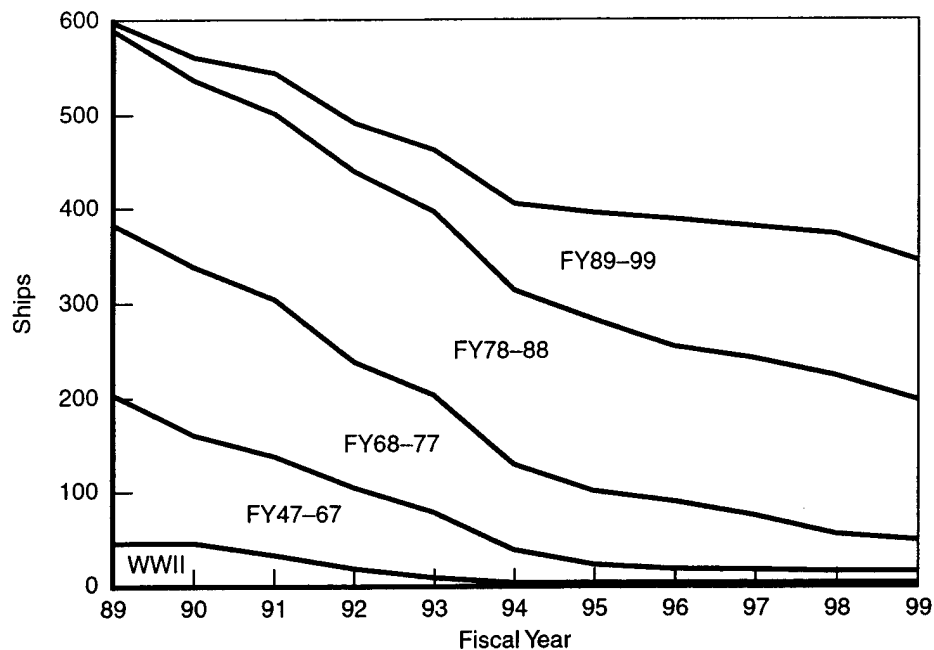


Figure 5—Post-Cold War Fleet Reduction By “Generation” of Ship (FY Commissioned)

Fig. 5 makes some vivid points. For one thing, the World War II cohort virtually vanishes, as does the first big lot of Cold War ships (those commissioned through FY67). Interestingly—and from the vantage point of any “drawdownological” study—there are very substantial reductions in the ranks of ships commissioned after FY67, and even after FY77 (by standard service lifetime rules, these units would have generally had some life left so their retirement in the 1990s could be considered premature). These reductions were thus justified less on the grounds of obsolescence than on the basis of affordability, especially from an operational perspective.

But the news is not all bad. On the one hand, the end-state force is considerably smaller. Despite this, it is generally much more capable on a unit-for-unit basis, in a reprise of the post-Vietnam strategy of replacing quantity with quality. Let’s consider this in more detail.

We have already noted how the surface combatant force is shifting toward an AEGIS-centric force. Consider in like fashion the evolution of amphibious lift forces. Of course, one-dimensional metrics oversimplify complex issues. But while we have a major reduction in ship numbers (active and reserve) from 65 to 41 ships (a 3/8 drop), measured in other ways, things look different. The total (full-load)

displacement of the force falls by only an eighth. The total aviation capacity of the FY99 force (in CH-46-equivalent spots) actually increases slightly. The total embarkable LCAC capability of the FY99 force more than doubles. In short, by some crude "fingerprint"-style measures, the standard 3-ship ARG of 2000 would in many ways be more capable than the typical 5-ship ARG of the 1980s.

#### IV. LESSONS FROM DRAWDOWNS FOR LONG-TERM POSTURE PLANNING

If there is one lesson to both drawdowns—besides, of course, the facts that life is unpredictable and that even the best-laid plans will tend to be derailed—it is that major bits of the defense debate operate on what amount to dubious presumptions about force planning.

In retrospect, a most advantageous aspect of the Cold War is that *it focused the attention of a fair amount of the planning establishment on the long term*. We operated on the premise that the USSR would be around indefinitely, so much of the Pentagon thought several steps ahead instead of concentrating exclusively on the *crise du jour*. Now that the Cold War—and its long-term planning anchor—is gone, planners seem gripped entirely by a "fascination with the now." This promotes several kinds of fallacious thinking, of which the following two varieties seem particularly pernicious.

The first (and lesser) one that appears often in defense debate seems to assume what is almost a "thermostat"-style model for posture planning. The implication is that key planning inputs (like threats, budgets, strategy, capabilities) somehow mesh together in a closely coupled and highly responsive system. So if the threat abates (even if only in a short-run way), there are calls for reductions in capabilities. Or, if this year's budgets tighten up, strategy must be rewritten and, along with this, force objectives require a trim. And so on.

I certainly do not wish to suggest that force planning should be rigidly segregated from what else is going on in the world. But history shows that force planning operates on a different schedule than the sorts of concerns that occupy Op-Ed pundits and speechwriters. It takes a long time to effect change in the posture, and once force structure components are gone, they tend to stay gone. The political "do loop" can cycle many, many times before even modest force changes can be realized. This is an obvious point to anyone who deals with real force end-items, but much ongoing debate seems oblivious to it.

Now, the second fallacy. Many people presume that the recapitalization of defense just "happens" or can otherwise be arranged, as it is needed, presumably on a steady-state basis. But, again, this has never been the case historically—defense investment patterns simply are not stable. Defense budgets over the long run



move up and down in pronounced cycles, and within these cycles, investment moves up fastest in good times, and falls hardest when austerity kicks in. These cycles are related only to a limited extent to real strategic requirements, reflecting rather the political mood of the moment, transient exigencies, force design fads, etc. Consequently, whatever people may be saying, our modernization situation in any given year is more than anything else a function of historical facts: though it is possible to dampen out these effects gradually in some cases, we must, to put it simply, live in any year with the hand we are dealt.[11]

Thus, when we factor in planning, acquisition, and service cycles, we find that our posture elements may be around for many decades. At any given point, most ships in current production will reflect a design environment that can date back as much as 10 to 15 years. Large blocks of the posture almost certainly reflect very different organizational concerns than the ones that occupy the current incumbents of the White House and E Ring. But the fact is that most major posture elements (especially higher-end ones) can adjust with remarkable flexibility to changing day-to-day circumstances.

This paper began with a discussion of the Korea-related mobilization, when we recalled to service a seemingly unlimited supply of WWII vintage ships, many of them capable in their own way, but nonetheless prone to certain liabilities. As noted, it was known decades ahead of time that this force would conk out circa 1970. Likewise, major SCN plans (generally) of the period FY52-66 would produce a force balloon that would itself someday deflate. At the appropriate moment—and usually with a very good understanding of the practical issues—it becomes necessary to pony up sufficient resources for the future. That said, consider the information presented in Table 2, which shows ship types procured during successive eight-year blocks.

**Table 2. Selected New Ship Types Procured by 8-Year Block, FY53-00**

Type Procured	SCN, by Fiscal Year Block					
	53-60	61-68	69-76	77-84	85-92	93-00
Carrier	6	3	2	3	2	1
Surface Combatant	78	88	49	58	36	26
Submarine	41	68	34	21	27	3
Amphib Lift	16	50	5	7	9	6
Mine/Patrol	35	19	8	6	24	3
Auxiliaries	10	61	17	30	36	5
Total Ships	196	289	115	125	134	44

Note: FYs shown (e.g., "53-60") reflect the ships authorized for those Fiscal Years. Procurement for FY47-50 was negligible. More than 80 ships were procured in FY51/52, but the great majority of these types were mine warfare and amphibious types demanded by specifics of the Korean conflict and not later deemed suitable for long-term retention. Totals omit some research and other types.

Ships have varying construction intervals and service lives and also present different life extension and modernization options. But the general gist of Table 2 is clear. Suppose that about 200 ships funded between FY53 and FY60 came on-line from the late 1950s through the middle of the 1960s. Those units mainly would come up for retirement roughly within the interval 1987-1997—at which time a new shipbuilding complement only 2/3 as big would be replacing the retirees: portending, all things being equal, a force reduction of 60 to 70 ships. It turned out that the reduction over this interval was greater, largely due to operational cost constraints.

In like fashion we see from such crude estimates that the future prospects for the fleet—at least, looking out 5 to 15 years—are by now (and short of truly drastic measures) foreordained. Even with generous increases in the SCN account, our ability to affect force size in the short run is highly limited.

That said, one's eye is drawn to the most recent phase of this history, namely, the SCN program for the post-Cold War interval (FY93-00). The forty-odd ships bought during this era might be, ton-for-ton, the greatest ships ever to go to sea—but on a pure head-count basis, ship construction at this rate is sufficient only to maintain a force of around 175 ships, c.f., the 300+ deemed essential in study after study of long-term USN posture requirements conducted during the 1990s.

We may not arrive at the ultimate day of reckoning for some time, but drawing from the factors highlighted in the drawdown histories given, there are only two options to be considered: (1) to increase substantially SCN budgets for the next 15 or more years in order to maintain a fleet on the order of its current form; or (2) to plan for an eventual contraction from a 300+ ship force to one of maybe 200 ships (or fewer). Putting it mildly, this obviously would have major strategic ramifications. We need not come up with an answer this month or even this year. But if we do not face up to things eventually, we are going to wind up with Outcome 2 whether we like it or not. [12]

Since the very late 1930s, the Nation has been committed to the idea of what was then called "a two-ocean Navy," and what might today better be termed a "Global Fleet." That being the case, a vital question becomes how far the force can contract before we can no longer meet the real requirements of scenarios in a world-wide context. Where, exactly, are the minimums, what is involved as one nears these minimums, and how does the world change once one is on their downward side?

The exact numbers will reflect all kinds of intricacies—to name just one, how long one can expect to rely on some WestPac homeports—but so far as this author is aware, the current long-term BUR fleet was laid out with such factors in mind. That is, the 300+ fleet really can not endure any more cuts without some kind of strategic retrenchment.

Thus, it is imperative to put on the table now the prospect that the United States will, absent decisive action, cease in about a decade or fifteen years, to have a truly global Navy. Is this an acceptable proposition? What advantages (including many we have come to take for granted and do not think about ordinarily) will we be giving up? How will we effect the transition from a 300+ ship fleet to a 175-ship force? What will this mean for larger U.S. strategic goals, for our coalition arrangements, and for the conduct of all-service theater operations?

As before, we will inevitably see a host of proposals, mainly involving the ingenious use of new technologies, that purport to explain how we can do remarkably more with less posture. If something along these lines works out, great. But in the past, there has been no reliable substitute for force rosters. The question for now, then, is how much to bet that the future will cooperate with our intentions and desires.

In short, the end of the line—which is preordained unless we take prompt and sustained remedial action—is that we are going to wind up eventually with a Navy that is not capable of either peacetime presence or more than one major regional combat operation (and perhaps only with substantial warning in any case). There may be ways of deferring this crunch, or minimizing its impact. But some facts cannot be

circumvented. To cite just one, there are certain force-level minimums that one needs, to assure a proper personnel rotation base, maintenance and upgrade availabilities, etc. To my knowledge, these numbers are built into the current plan. There is, then, no further margin for reduction.

It has been fashionable, for about a decade, to speak in sweeping terms about some sort of "New World" or other. The implication—undercut, one would have to suggest, by various events of the 1990s and the catastrophe of September 2001—is that "New World" equates across-the-boards to "Better World." In selling soap, that presumption may be tolerable. But it doesn't make the grade in naval force planning. And even if events do change for the better, there is still an argument for not going into the future underinsured.

## **V. THE BOTTOM LINE**

To sum it all up, most people who render opinions on force issues focus on specific weapons designs, strategy subtleties, operational concepts, arms control or other political realities, or what-have-you. In fact, when we look at the fleet or most any other large-scale force structure element over the long run, two factors more than any other explain the particulars of our posture.

The first, and lesser of these is the current budget. If funds simply are not available, unaffordable force elements must go. There are few ways to get around this reality—but none cuts it for more than a few years.

The most important determinant of our posture at any given point is, quite simply, *history*. We may have all kinds of big plans and ideas, and one may hear bandied about all kinds of big talk about new options. But what is available is first and foremost a function of things that were done or decided ten, twenty, even thirty years previously. Failing to make the resources available now for force structure may have little immediate effect, but somewhere down the line the price will have to be paid. We have seen how historical force drivers shaped two major Navy posture divestitures. Will someone years from now likewise be pointing to the inadequate fleet recapitalization of the 1990s and later as the basis for a third major drawdown and the critical factor in leading to an American "One-Ocean" Navy?

## ENDNOTES

[1] In this paper, when I speak of the Navy's "posture" or "force structure," I am talking about its fleet. But roughly, the same paper could be written, with varying details, about other Navy force elements for instance, its land-based aviation components, Marine Corps posture, etc.

[2] The exact numbers vary, of course, on one's counting rules--but while different approaches yield slightly different numbers, the broad points made in this paper do not change with different accounting schemes.

[3] Force and supporting acquisition objectives plans put together up through this time were designed according to strict assignments of "military need" and did not reflect formal budget constraints. This no longer happens.

[4] The residue of the once vast WWII force amounted almost entirely to support forces, except for some FRAMed DDs assigned to the NRF.

[5] These were some older DE classes, which were in any event never really proper blue ocean or battle group combatants; Korean-war era coastal mine warfare types; and some early post-war LSTs.

[6] The prototypical case in point are the battleships--vessels that would always find enthusiastic proponents regardless of their age, and which could always prove valuable in certain operations. But these practical advantages (and their awesome presence value) aside, these ships are inevitably brought down by their ravenous logistical demands (represented by their 1,500+-person crews, systems whose makers have long gone out of business, etc.).

[7] Some readers may recall dissenting views at the time to the effect published that both the *Spruance* and *Perry* classes were not up to the demands of open-ocean battle group operations: but both programs have proven successful.

[8] Published by the U.S. Naval Institute Press (various editions).

[9] For instance, with the rapid decay of the Soviet submarine threat, the requirement for extensive convoying of MEF and URG forces declined: as a consequence (in this case) *Knox* frigates would be in less demand.

[10] The numbers shown vary slightly with some official public accounts, since for reasons of commonality with historical data, I have included forces designated as NRF Category B and Local Defense Forces in the totals.

[11] Sometimes it is possible, by a combination of upgrading, design, and clever scheduling, to dampen out the effects of historical "binges" into smoother follow-on profiles. Perhaps the most striking case of this is the replacement of the 41-boat *Polaris* program with the more capable *Ohio* class, a program that, rather than being bought all at once as was *Polaris*, was phased in in a far more manageable profile (with one boat being bought per year on average).

[12] There are some miscellaneous mitigating palliatives, such as SLEPs or more forward basing. But even these are not sufficient to maintain an adequate presence posture and to fight two regional contingencies.